The Characteristics of Intentional, Mature, Make-Believe Play: How Play Influences Development
Front Porch Series Broadcast Calls

Hello to everyone. Good morning or good afternoon, depending on where you're listening from today. I'm Gail Joseph. I'm the Co-Director of the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, funded by the Office of Head Start. And we are so delighted to welcome you all to another 45 minutes on the Front Porch, if you will.

So the Front Porch Series, our Front Porch broadcast conference call series that we do each month, is really an opportunity for us all to gather together as a community of learners to hear about innovative research-to-practice topics. And they're all focused on increasing the quality of teaching and learning for young children in our Head Start programs and beyond in the field. And we are so delighted today, just thrilled, really, to talk about a topic that I think comes up quite often when we're talking about the quality of teaching and learning and around school readiness.

So we often hear, as we're going around talking about increasing school readiness for young children, somebody always will raise their hand in the audience and say, "But what about play?" And we're so happy to have one of the preeminent experts around the importance of play joining us today to talk about how absolutely important it is that young children have opportunities to play not only in our preschool programs but beyond.

And so joining us to talk about the characteristics of play and how play influences development is none other than Dr. Deborah Leong, who I'm sure many of you know. And she is, just to give you a little bit of her background, she's a professor emerita of psychology at Metropolitan State University of Denver. And she has many decades of experience in teaching in the Department of Psychology. She received her many degrees, her bachelor's and PhD from Stanford, and she has a master's from Harvard as well. And you might know her associated with the Tools of the Mind approach to early learning, which she co-developed with Dr. Elena Bodrova. They together have also written numerous books and articles and have videos out there that really focus on the Vygotskian approach to psychology and the development of play.

And so just as always, I'm going to make this introduction short, turn it over to our featured speaker, and you all have the opportunity as listeners to type in questions in the question bar part of your screen, and we'll make sure that we get to as many of those as we can after Dr. Leong has completed her presentation today. And so it is, without further ado, my pleasure to turn it over to Dr. Leong to talk about the importance of play.

DR. LEONG: Thank you very much. And welcome to everyone. So today my goal is to kind of talk about what the characteristics are of intentional, mature, make-believe play and how play influences development, and to leave you with some ideas that maybe you can implement in your classroom to improve the level of play that you have.

First, I wanted to start off by just talking about what play is positively related to. And play is related to the development of self-regulation. There is a lot of Vygotskian research that shows that children who — when they are engaged in make-believe play, they are practicing how to regulate themselves in a way that's different from when they follow directions. Because following directions is really, really teacher direction or other direction by another person and not self-regulation. So in a bunch of res-- in a group of research studies, Vygotskians found that when children were playing, they could remember

more, they could pay attention longer, and they could regulate themselves better than they could in any other kind of a situation.

So we know that play helps children develop self-regulation. I'm going to talk a little bit about that later, more later. We know that children practice cognitive skills, like symbolic generalization, which means that they are able to take a block and turn it into a telephone and then make it into a boat. That kind of symbolic representation is practice for reading, where you take the word "dog" and then you represent it by D-O-G rather than just a picture of the object. Of course, children develop very important social skills. They learn to share, to get along with other people. They learn to negotiate what they want with others. And we also know that it's important for successful school adjustment. Play provides many of the skills that children will need to have when they go to kindergarten. And it's also important for the acquisition of literacy skills, because in play, again, the symbolic representation is really important. And if you include literacy elements in your play centers, children actually practice trying to write, remembering each other's names, all kinds of things — using books — in order to get ideas for play.

So not all play is created the same for Vygotskians. There's a big difference between immature play and mature play. And for Vygotskians, mature play is the kind of play that encourages the development of all those wonderful things, and immature play kind of leaves children at the same place. So we want to foster play that lifts children from immature play to mature play. So in order to understand how you do that, you have to have a definition of immature play. So in immature play, children do not have any role. They just kind of play with objects. And having a role means that you are playing being somebody. You're being the mommy, the daddy, the dog, the doctor, the veterinarian. You play being someone else. And this idea of the role is really important, because for Vygotskians, what it means when you have a role is that there are rules, and I'm going to talk about that more in a minute.

So when they have immature play, children don't have a role. If you give them a role, they can't sustain that role for very long. They don't use language to create the roles or to talk about the scenario. They have frequent fights and arguments about roles and props. So they're really playing with the stuff that's in the center, and they're not playing a person. Because what will happen is there will be a prop that children — that is particularly enticing, like a pretend camera or something like that, and if children don't have a role, then the person who's not the photographer will just want to play with that camera because it's neat. But if they have a role, they recognize that they're the person who's having the picture taken of them, not the cameraman, and so then they wouldn't want to even use that prop because it doesn't belong to their role. They have frequent fights and arguments: "I want to do this," "I got this first," "I said this first." All of those kinds of things are characteristics of immature play. And another one that I neglected to write here is that in immature play, you see children wander from center to center, and they aren't in a role; they're just wandering from thing to thing to play with.

So in contrast, mature play has explicit roles and implicit rules. So what this means is that children play being a person. And this role, like this little girl in the picture who's the eye doctor, means that she does certain things. Like she wouldn't pick up a baby, because she's the doctor and she's supposed to be testing this little boy. The little boy wouldn't grab the pointer from her and start pointing to the letters, because he's the patient. So the reason Vygotsky says they're implicit is that children really don't discuss what those roles are. They don't say, "I'm the doctor, so that means that I use the pointer and you don't." But what happen is the rules are hidden underneath, and when children violate the rules, that's when you see the rule come out.

So, for example, the other day I was in a Head Start classroom and they were playing going to school on a bus, and they had all these chairs lined up, and the bus driver is sitting in the front and he's pretending to take tickets. And then he sees the truck that he's been waiting for the whole morning come free, somebody let go of the truck. And so he jumps up to get off the bus, and there's like this chorus of things, of calls from the children who are the bus passengers, saying, "You can't get off the bus. You need to sit on the bus. You're the driver. You have to take the tickets. You can't get off the bus." So you can see that the rules are made explicit when children violate them.

So there is an explicit—there's a pretend scenario that's created through language. So children will say who they are: "I'm the mommy." And they'll kind of talk about what the mommy's going to do: "I'm going to make you dinner, and then you're going to sit down," or, "I'm the daddy, and I'm making dinner, and you're going to sit down and you're going to do this." And children kind of talk to each other about what that really means, like, "I don't want to do that. I want to be the doctor." And so they actually negotiate the pretend scenario through language.

Another characteristic of mature play is children use symbolic props. So you don't have to have plastic food for everything. Now, when children start developing mature play, they have to have enough props so they remember who they are. So you'll see often they'll kind of dress up, or in our program, we provide one prop per role to help children remember who they are. But as they become — have mature play, what they're able to do is to just invent props. And in fact, the most — the highest level of mature play, children don't even need props; they just say, "I have the princess costume on, and so I'm the princess." And everyone agrees, and so that's the ultimate symbolic prop. It's so abstract that it's just totally in your imagination.

Another characteristic of mature play is that there are multiple interwoven themes. You know, the mommy's a doctor and the Mommy, the dad is a garage mechanic and the dad. So themes are interwoven, and children discuss how these themes work together. And the last is that there's an extended time frame, which means that play lasts day after day. Children can continue the theme one day to the next, and they pick up where they were before. And this is, I think, the hardest thing for us in preschool to do because children — we want children to go to different centers and to play different roles, but going back and playing the same thing and extending it is still — is very important. And Vygotsky argued that that's one of the characteristics of mature make-believe play is that children play the same thing over and over again. So if you think about yourself as a child during the summer and your mother threw you out of your house like mine did, she actually locked the front door so you couldn't get back in. But what happens is we would hang out in the neighborhood and we would play the same thing day after day, week after week, until people got tired of it. But it took much longer for us to get tired of the theme than it takes children today.

So how can you foster make-believe play in preschool? At the beginning of the year, you need to set up a rich environment with many roles. So you have to provide a background experience for children so that they know how to play. And I think this is one of the most difficult things for us today because children come to preschool often with very little play experience, whereas 20 years ago, children had a much greater background in how to play and how it works and how to set up props because they played in mixed age groups in the neighborhood and didn't play in this very narrow set of play groups that children have today. Also, our environment, you know, I used to tell my students I really worried because I believe that young children are starting to fall out of the flow of life. And what I mean by this is that as adults, we do all kinds of things to keep them occupied when we're doing errands or doing things, whereas 20 years ago, we had to drag them with us, right? So you went to the grocery store, you

dragged all of your children with you. You didn't — so now, instead of sitting up next to you in the supermarket where they can see everything, they're in these little cars in the front of the supermarket cart where they don't really see a lot of people. What they see are legs and they see the floor, which now has advertisements on it, and they see on the side of the aisles, they see all these products. So to keep them occupied and happy while parents are shopping, supermarkets invented these cars in the front, and the upshot of that is now children don't see what's going on in the supermarket.

Another example is when parents are cooking at home, often they turn on the television to keep the children out of the kitchen. So before, my son, who's now 26, used to play on the floor with pots and pans, or at the counter with pots and pans just like me, and I would cook and he'd pretend to cook. But now if you turn on a video, he's not even watching. He wouldn't be able to see. So it happens in the car. You have videos in the car so they don't bother you, but in the meantime, they're not watching what happens when you drive. So it's just an example of how much harder it is to get mature play going in today's classroom because children are not in the flow of life so that they don't know a lot about what happens.

So when I say set up a rich environment, what happens is we often have to — we often have to actually show children what it's like in the kitchen and what happens in the kitchen. We give demonstrations. So it's important to set up a rich environment, to use books, to use pictures from the child's home, use all kinds of things to set up this rich environment that has many roles that children would be able to play. You need to provide props to help children stay in the role, and these props should be child-created. So I know that a lot of us spend a lot of money on plastic hamburgers and things like that for our play centers. And that's okay. But I think what's important is that you need to add things that children make. So why can't you have spaghetti made of yarn that they cut up or shredded pieces of paper for the salad? You need to figure out ways for them to create and invent their own props.

Another thing that I think is really important is managing the play centers so that an optimum number of children can be engaged in them. And I know that in some programs, children are allowed to just go to any center that they want to. And the difficulty with that at the beginning of the year is that children don't have the social skills to negotiate the roles and the scenario, because it's very hard to interact with more than two or three other people. So if you've ever tried to invent anything by committee, you know what this is like. So and here you are as an adult, you have all these great social skills, and still we struggle with trying to work with more than two to three people. So what we suggest is that you manage the centers. And so this is a management wheel for half the class, where actually four children can go into a center. They wear little colored clips to remind them what center they want to go to. For us, it's very important that they try to stay in that center for at least a few minutes before they make another choice. And in Tools classes, we work really hard in trying to entice them to stay, because you really can't get play going if everybody keeps moving around a lot. You can't get that deep scenario and the theme and everything like that going. So we have a time of the day where we allow children to have more free play, but we really try to have a time of the day where we really work on staying — having a manageable number of children in a center, and children staying and playing with each other and having a scenario and roles.

Another thing we really work on is encouraging children to think ahead. So we ask them when they choose their center not just to say, "I'm going to the housekeeping area," but to say what they're going to do there. And in fact, we ask them to draw and write their plans. So I think the most important takeaway from this is that they say what they're going to do, not just who they're going to be. Because what that does is it helps children start to self-regulate because they'll remember who they're going to

be when they get to the center. And they'll have in their mind a set of actions, actions and behaviors that go along with their role. And this will allow them to stay in the role a little bit longer, which is the major way that play influences self-regulation.

Another thing that we need to do is to make sure that we help children with play as it's happening. So children need support in thinking of what else to do in their role. And often when we suggest things that they can do to extend their role, we try to think of a social problem that might happen to that role in that situation. So, for example, if they're playing doctor's office and the patient's getting tired of being the patient, often it's because they can't think of anything else to do but to say, "My baby broke his arm." So you can suggest something else. You can say, "Well, what if the baby has a fever and you went home and you did what the doctor said, but the baby's still sick? How would you feel and what would you do then?" So you kind of help children build on their scenario, figure out what could happen next. If they're in a restaurant, and the waiter has given — has taken the order and comes back with your food, what problem could possibly happen? You could not have cheese on your cheeseburger or you could find a fly in your salad. I don't know, whatever. But you — what's important is really kind of talking about how you could extend the play, because children often get stuck in a scenario at the very beginning of the year.

So how do you decide whether to step into the play? So we believe that teachers need to step in, but we also believe that play is something where the teacher shouldn't take over. Because when you become the major focus of the play, then it becomes a teacher-directed activity instead of a child-negotiated activity. So what we prefer is scaffolding, which is the term that Vygotskians use to describe the fact that you give a lot of support when they need it, and then you start moving out of giving that support. So you may start off as being the client in the beauty shop who's getting her hair done, but then you hand that role over to another child and then you step back and you interact in a different way until eventually you let them carry on the entire scenario and the negotiation on their own. But we wouldn't — we wouldn't just stand back and watch and let them argue and not develop this mature play, so your role is very important and should be quite active when children are playing in an immature way.

So, how to decide whether or not to step into the play. You observe what is going on in the play. What are they doing? If there's little interaction and they aren't talking to each other or no obvious roles or if they're just manipulating things, you have to step in. And you step in by providing a scenario and getting them all into roles. If you use a planning technique, what we often do is say, "Well, what did you plan to be at the beginning?" If children are aggressive, of course, or using toys improperly, of course you have to step in.

So the way we would scaffold, you can scaffold by standing outside the play, by making a comment to encourage the roles if there are no roles. You can provide verbal cues on what to do. One of the techniques that teachers really in our program love to use is you pretend you call in if they have a telephone, and you say — you help give verbal cues about what they can do or another scenario they might be able to play. You use the play plan to direct and encourage more role play. Or you can enter the play. And so what we do is we stand off to the side or sit down. We don't stand in the middle of where they're interacting but stand on the periphery inside the center. We prompt a role by saying, "So what else does the doctor do? What does the doctor do? What else can he do, and what can he do next?" And here's the calling on the phone. You introduce another role by calling on the phone. Like at the restaurant, you can make an order. You can be another patient calling into the doctor's office.

And last, we would take a role and describe who you are and what you're doing and we try to make it be the role that's being acted on rather than the actor. So, for example, if they were playing beauty shop, we wouldn't be the beautician, we would be the customer. So you take a subservient or an ancillary role, and then you have the children playing the main role. So, for example, in the doctor's office, we would be the patient, we wouldn't become the doctor. Unless children didn't know what to do, and in that case we would be the doctor so that we're sure that they have a scenario to act out and understand what the roles are.

So, in conclusion, I just want to again reiterate the importance of this role, the idea of the role. So if you come away with anything, I hope that you realize how important being somebody is in the play, that children have to be somebody, they play being somebody in mature, make-believe play. And that it's adhering to that role voluntarily which produces the self-regulation in young children. Because when — children can look self-regulated in the sense that they follow directions and they do what you ask them to do, but that isn't the same as being self-regulated. Self-regulation means that you obey the rules because that's the right thing to do. And so children can be doing and participating in an activity and be self-regulated, which means they're doing it because they know this is what you're supposed to do and they understand all of this, as opposed to doing it just because the teacher says. And so I think one of the great gifts of play is that when children become these really mature players, they really underst-- develop this self-regulation that goes elsewhere, that is — you can see it in other things that they do.

So an example of mature, make-believe play is I walked into this classroom, and this little boy walked up to me and he has a red vest on and he says, "Welcome to Home Depot. You can do it. We can help." And they had turned — they had gone on a field trip to the Home Depot, and they had turned every single center into a department in Home Depot. And so he said to me, "So what do you want to renovate?" And of course being the researcher, I wanted to figure out if he actually knew what the word "renovate" was, because that's a pretty big word for somebody who's 4 years old, and so I said, "I'm going to renovate my shoe." And he rolled his eyes like I'm the dumbest woman in the world, and he said, "You have to renovate your house, like your kitchen or your dining room or your living room." So I said, "Okay, well, I'm going to renovate my kitchen." So he turns to the side and he says, "Great, here's Bob, your design consultant," and Bob is 3 years old and he has a piece of paper and a big red crayon. So Bob says, takes me to the side, and he says, "Okay, so where do you want to put your stove, your refrigerator," which he could barely pronounce. And so he would make marks all over this paper. Of course, they were just scribbles all over the paper. And when we were done, he said, "You have to go to electrical and plumbing." And he pointed across the way, and there was a part of the center that was designed as electrical and plumbing, and they had pictures of all these Kohler faucets and things like that and they were helping me choose all of those things. And then they sent me on to floors or carpets or something like that.

And so the point is that when children are playing — there were also, I should say, other children who were customers, not just me. There was a young family behind me with a little baby, and they were going to fix the baby's room. So what you had was this incredibly rich environment, and they were marking down things and writing and telling me how much stuff cost. They gave me a credit card that I could use. I cashed thousands of dollars worth of stuff. But anyway, they — and so there were children that were the shoppers and they were walking from center to center, and each center had two or three kids that were manning that center. They had the vocabulary and the wording down pat. And I think that is the example of mature, make-believe play I want to leave you with. So thank you very much.